

# Coping Facts

## HOW CHILDREN REACT DEVELOPMENTALLY TO DISASTER EVENTS

Children may react in different ways to a disaster event. Some may react immediately to what has taken place; others may not react for weeks or months. Still others might not react at all. Knowing developmentally what to recognize in your child can help you help your child during these difficult times:

### **Ages one to five:**

It is difficult for this age group to adjust to traumatic changes and loss. They will rely heavily on their parents and family members to help them cope as they have not developed their own coping skills at this time. Your calmness and patience is important to your children.

Signs of difficulties may include regressing to an earlier developmental stage. Examples of this might include bedwetting or thumb sucking. Small children may exhibit more fear of strangers, darkness or monsters. They may become very clingy, have changes in eating or sleeping patterns and even have unexplainable aches and pains. They may talk constantly about the traumatic event or exaggerate it. Children might also exhibit their stress in hyperactivity, disobedience, aggressive or withdrawn behaviors or even speech difficulties.

### **Ages five to eleven:**

This age group may exhibit some of the same reactions as the one to five year olds. They may also “regress” developmentally asking to be fed or dressed. Their behaviors may include withdrawal from friends, fear of going places, wanting more attention from their parents, declines in school performance, difficulty in concentrating or heightened aggression.

### **Ages twelve to fourteen:**

Adolescents under stress may also compete for the attention of teachers or parents, desert their responsibilities including school work and chores, withdraw, or resist authority and become more aggressive. They may begin experimentation with alcohol or drugs. At this age teens relate better with their friends than adults. Provide them truthful, succinct information about events.

### **Older Teens:**

Older teens may exhibit the same stressors as younger teens. However, additionally they may feel guilt or helplessness because of their inability to help. They may also minimize their reaction to the traumatic event.

### **Things you can do to help:**

- Cuddle little ones and give verbal support
- Limit television watching. Little ones may not be able to distinguish between re-plays and the real event.
- Answer questions honestly, but briefly. Do not allow the subject to dominate conversations
- Help your children express their emotions through art, special projects or conversation.
- Find a way to help children of all ages help others affected by the disaster.
- Keep a normal routine.

- Let children participate in recreational activities with your family and friends.
- Your feelings will communicate to your children so try to remain calm.
- Acknowledge your own reactions and what you are doing to heal: helping others, exercising, etc.